

TYPES OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE ESSAYS WRITTEN BY FOURTH-SEMESTER STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, PETRA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Limengka, P.E.¹ and Kuntjara, E.²

^{1,2} English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia
e-mail: edward_wong.triton@yahoo.com.sg; harijantie@gmail.com

Abstract

This study deals with errors which include tenses (verb forms), number agreement, and active-passive voice, word order, and word formation on students' essays. The purpose of this study is to find out the types of errors committed by the students in Written 4 class based on five categories which are addition, omission, misformation, misordering and blends. The writer found that the most frequent error is misformation, especially the misformation of verbs and nouns. In conclusion, the students committed misformation, misordering, addition, omission, and blends errors; and misformation is the most commonly committed error which is found in their essays.

Keywords: Grammatical errors, error analysis, students' essays, second language writing.

Students of English Department are required to communicate in English whenever they communicate on academic context, either in written or spoken. Batstone (1994) states, "Language without grammar would be chaotic and cause the same communication problem, such as grammatical errors in writing and speaking." Therefore, rather than being only rules for ordering words, grammar is indeed a resource for good communication (Halliday and Hasan, 1989 in Hyland, 2002).

Fourth-semester students of English Department, Petra Christian University are those who are at the end of their second year in the university and have passed their first, second, and third writing classes. They are expected to have writing competence as they are in their last writing class. Writing competence, indeed, includes a good ability concerning grammar, arrangement, and punctuation (Hyland, 2002). In this research, the writer focuses on students' grammar in essays written by students in Written English 4 class. Myles (2002) mentioned that second-language students might produce errors. In fact, even in their last writing class, many students still have problems concerning basic English grammar. So, it would be useful for teachers to find out how good the students' ability to compose grammatically-correct sentences is.

This study aims to reveal the types of errors appearing in essays written by the fourth-semester students. Furthermore, the writer would like to know the frequency of occurrence of each error type in the essays. Finally, this research aims to find out the most frequent error type in the students' essays.

In this study, the students were limited to those who are taking Written English 4 class. The essays that were analyzed were their final essays taken from their final test. Their final test is the best data to use because at the end of the Written English 4 class, they should be able to master writing competence. Besides, the students must have done their best efforts in the test in order to get a good score, so the essays produced might contain the most accurate data of errors showing students' real ability and performance.

As mentioned in "The error in the Second Language Acquisition" by Maicusi and Maicusi (2000), in learning process, errors have always been regarded negatively, and must be avoided. As a result, teachers tend to show a repressive attitude to their students.

On one hand, errors are considered as a failure of teaching process and on the other hand, they are seen as a natural result that can hardly be avoided, so we should deal and learn from them. Therefore, errors can be a very helpful means in learning a foreign language as Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 51) quoted in “Analyzing Learner Language”, Corder (1967) explained:

Learner errors are significant in three ways. (1) They serve a pedagogic purpose by showing teachers what learners have learned and what they have not mastered; (2) they serve a research purpose by providing evidence about how languages are learned; and (3) they serve a learning purpose by acting as devices by which learners can discover the rules of the target language (i.e. by obtaining feedback on their errors).

Corder (1974) in Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) distinguished five steps in conducting error analysis.

- **Collection of a sample of learner language.** To provide data for the error analysis, the researcher needs to collect a sample of learner language. In this step, the researcher may control the data by narrowly specifying the sample he/she intends to collect (57).
- **Identification of errors.** The identification of errors involves a comparison between learners’ sentences and native speakers’ sentences in the same context. Then, the researcher could identify which part of learners’ sentences is different from the “reconstructed version” (p. 58).
- **Description of errors.** The description of errors usually employs either linguistic taxonomy or surface structure taxonomy to describe the differences between learner’s sentences and native speakers’ sentences (60).
- **Explanation of errors.** “Explaining errors involves determining their sources in order to account for why they were made” (62). Obviously, learners make errors due to the difficulties in accessing their L2 knowledge in communication.
- **Error evaluation.** Error evaluation is a supplementary stage in error analysis. “It involves determining the gravity of different errors with a view to deciding which ones should receive instruction” (67).

In Dulay, Burt, and Krashen’s Surface Structure Taxonomy (1982 in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 61), four categories were proposed to explain how sentences deviate from the correct forms because the learners change the surface structure. Those categories are:

- **Addition.** Addition is indicated by the presence of an ‘unwanted’ item in sentences. The unwanted items do not appear in a well-formed utterance. This happens when the learners overuse certain grammatical rules of the target language. Example: *He didn’t come. (Correction: He didn’t come) (p. 61).
- **Omission.** Omission is indicated by the absence of certain item that must appear in sentences. This usually happens in the early stages of second language acquisition. Example: *My sisters very pretty. (Correction: My sister is very pretty) (p. 61).
- **Misformation.** Misformation is indicated by the use of wrong forms of certain morphemes or structures. Example: *Me don’t like. (Correction: I don’t like) (p. 61).
- **Misordering.** Misordering is indicated by the incorrect placement of certain morphemes. Example: *She fights all the time her brother. (Correction: She fights her brother all the time) (p. 61).

James (1998) suggested one category is added:

- **Blends.** Blends occurs when two or more morphemes that have the same function appear in a sentence. Example: *The only one thing I want. (Correction: The only thing I want) (p. 61).

Using this categorization, the writer will find out whether there are some addition, omission, misformation, and misordering on the parts of speech and agreements in students' writing. Combining the rules of the parts of speech, agreements, and this taxonomy, the data field will be made easier and more ordered.

METHODS

In this research, the writer used text analysis to find errors in the essays, and presented them to be analyzed. Firstly, the writer collected the source of data which is the students' essays in digital form, and sorted the essays from the highest one to the lowest one based on the grades of the essays themselves instead of the grades of their whole performance during the semester. Next, the writer categorized the essays into A, B+, B, C+, C, or D grade based on Petra grading system. Then, the writer numbered each composition with a number. Essay 1 and 2 belong to students with A grade, essay 3 and 4 belong to students with B+ grade, essays 5 and 6 belong to students with B grade, essay 7 and 8 belong to students with C+ grade, essay 9 and 10 belong to students with C grade, and essay 11 and 12 belong to students with D grade. Then, the writer started reading the compositions, and marked each error on the essays. The errors were given identification numbers as well to make them easily found later on. Therefore, there were two digits of number employed to identify an error which the first digit is the essay number, and the second digit is the error number. After numbering the errors, the writer put the data of errors of each essay into a table of error list, which can be seen in a table. The data would be attached in the appendix. In addition, errors here are any deviated grammatical form breaking Standard English grammar in Azar's (1999) book, Understanding and Using English Grammar Third Edition, Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary Third Edition, and Microsoft Encarta Dictionary.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the writer provided the discussion and analysis based on the errors produced by the students of Written English 4 class.

Table of Total Error Occurrence

Grade SST	A	B+	B	C+	C	D	Total
Addition	0 0 .00%	3 1 .13%	3 1 .13%	2 0 .75%	4 1 .50%	4 1 .50%	16 6.02 %
Omission	2 0 .75%	3 1 .13%	1 4 .14%	3 1 .13%	2 3 .65%	1 2 .51%	54 20.30 %
Misformation	1 4 5 .26%	1 9 7 .14%	4 7 1 7.76%	1 7 6 .39%	4 0 1 5.04%	4 4 1 6.54%	181 68.05 %
Misordering	0 0 .00%	1 0 .38%	1 0 .38%	1 0 .38%	2 0 .75%	5 1 .88%	10 3.76 %
Blends	0 0 .00%	0 0 .00%	1 0 .38%	1 0 .38%	1 0 .38%	2 0 .75%	5 1.88 %
Total	1 6 6 .02%	2 6 9 .77%	6 3 2 3.68%	2 4 9 .02%	7 0 2 6.32%	6 7 2 5.19%	266 100.0 0%

In the table above, the writer identified 266 errors, of which the most frequent error is misformation. This chapter followed an order of importance, in which the writer discussed the data from the most frequent error type to the least frequent error type.

Misformation

Misformation is any wrong form of certain morphemes or structures. There were 181 (68.05%) errors in total showing misformation, and the majority of the misformations are on verbs and nouns. In this case, the writer could see the weakness of some students in constructing errorless verbs and nouns. On one hand, errors in verbs are usually in the form of inter-language which is a combination of two tenses, violated number agreement, or misemployed active-passive voice. On the other hand, error nouns are usually in the form of singular-plural confusion and wrong usage of the word families. The following are the examples and explanations of misformation errors found in the students' essays.

• Example 1:

Teachers in international schools are also encouraged to use more various learning methods in **international school**, which **includes** discussion, class activities, and **presentation**. (1.3)

It might seem that the sentence does not contain any errors, but the writer identified three errors in the sentence which are the bold words violating the generalization rule and number agreement of English grammar. The writer suggested the following correction to the sentence:

Teachers in international schools are also encouraged to use more various learning methods in **international schools**, which **include** discussion, class activities, and **presentations**.

The sentence generalizes any international schools and any presentations. So, the rule of generalization must be applied. Azar (1999) stated that in generalization, nouns need to be either singular or plural, and it is done by either adding an article showing singularity or adding -s/-es suffix showing plurality of the noun. So, "international school" and "presentation" should be in their plural form. Besides, "includes" is a part of the adjective clause explaining "various learning methods" which is a plural noun. Therefore, it should be in its simple form without any suffix. However, "discussion" is not really necessary to have an article as it could be either countable or uncountable.

• Example 2:

Finally, arranging cultural events is the final efforts that can make the Indonesian youth **knowing** and **loving** the local culture. (5.28)

"Make" in the sentence is a causative verb, and it means that it should be followed by the simple form of the verbs, "know" and "love" (Azar, 1999). The correction to the sentence is as followed:

Finally, arranging cultural events is the final effort that can make the Indonesian youth **know** and **love** the local culture.

Here, the writer could explain that the students had already known about the grammar as they employed the causative verb in their sentences. Nevertheless, they might forget the formula and misform the following verbs.

Omission

Omission is any deletion of certain necessary items in sentences. There are 54 (20.30%) errors in total showing omission, and those errors are the omission of articles, verbs, and prepositions. In this case, the writer noticed the flaw of the student's grammar which omits certain parts of the sentence. The most possible reason is that the students wrote in English, but they use Bahasa Indonesia style or word ordering to express their ideas. The examples are as followed:

- Example 1:

International school is well-known as the type which requires a lot of money.(1.1)

As explained in misinformation example 1, generalization requires the noun to be either singular or plural. The predicate in the sentence is "is" which is for singular nouns. Therefore, there are supposed to be the article "a" before the noun phrase "international school". The best correction is:

An international school is well-known as a type which requires a lot of money.

The statement above generalizes any international school, so the rule of generalization (Azar, 1999) must be applied.

- Example 2:

After doing the presentation and joining the discussion on the forum, these students **should back** to their province with a mission: overcoming the problems related to the culture. (5.19)

In this case, the modal "should" is followed by "back" which may actually be a verb according to Cambridge Dictionary. However, the meaning of the word "back" as a verb is to "support", "move away", and "cover". In fact, the sentence does not convey any idea of supporting, moving away, or covering something, but going back to one's own provinces. Therefore, the writer proposed the following correction:

After doing the presentation and joining the discussion in the forum, these students **should go back** to their province with a mission: overcoming the problems related to the culture.

The word "back" in the sentence is supposed to be an adverb which follows the verb "go" instead of being a "verb" because the sentence is supposed to convey a message with verb "go". Therefore, the verb in the sentence was missing.

Addition

Addition is any use of unnecessary items in the sentences. There are 16 (6.02%) errors showing addition in the students' essays, and they are errors on articles, conjunctions, verbs, prepositions, pronouns, and nouns. Again, the most possible reason is that the students used Indonesian speaking style in writing their essays.

- Example 1:

Also, if the Japanese and Korean films have good actor and actresses that **make their acting is very natural**, we can make it so. (4.7)

In this sentence, the word "make", according to Cambridge Dictionary, act as a verb, and it can be followed by a noun, an adjective, and a past participle. Here are the examples:

[+ noun] It's the good weather that makes Spain **such a popular tourist destination**.

[+ past participle] I can make myself **understood** in French, but I'm not fluent.

[+ adjective] The company accounts have not yet been made **public**.

In fact, “make” in the sentence is followed by “is” which is a verb. Indeed, the form is an error, and the writer made the following correction to the sentence:

Also, if the Japanese and Korean films have good actors and actresses that **make their acting very natural**, we can make it so.

“Is” in the sentence is indeed unnecessary because “make” can be directly followed by “very natural” without any other form needed. Furthermore, the writer noticed that “so” can be an error as well if it functions as an adverb which means “the same way” because it should be “too” instead of “so”. However, the writer assumed that the student wanted to mention again something he wrote earlier which refers to making Indonesian movies have good actors and actresses who have natural acting.

• Example 2:

The best and recommended students all over **the** Indonesia should be chosen to join this seminar and given challenge to present problems related to the extinction of their local cultures. (5.13)

Here, the writer noticed that the student added the article “the” before “Indonesia” which is unnecessary as proper nouns do not need any article. Therefore, the writer corrected the error as followed:

The best and recommended students all over Indonesia should be chosen to join this seminar and given challenge to present problems related to the extinction of their local cultures.

Some similar cases happened in addition of article because the students overused the article. Even though articles seem a small thing, it might change the whole context and meaning of the sentence. In fact, the students still had problems with articles since they might not really know the function of each article.

Misordering

Misordering is any incorrect placement of certain morphemes in sentences. There are 10 (3.76%) errors showing misordering in students’ essay, and they are mostly misordering between verb and adverb.

• Example 1:

In result, there are some of **local cultures extinct** because there are no efforts done by the parents or even government, making young people preserving the local cultures. (5.5)

In this sentence, the student treated the word “extinct” as a verb. However, according to Cambridge dictionary, “extinct” is an adjective, so it is impossible to place “extinct” right after a noun phrase, “local cultures”. The writer proposed the following correction:

In result, there are some **extinct local cultures** because there are no efforts done by the parents or even government, making young people preserve the local cultures.

Actually, there is another way to correct the error besides reordering the words. It is by adding a verb before “extinct” such as “get” or “become”. Nevertheless, the writer thought that the sentence would be more effective and concise if “extinct” is reordered as to have a good writing skill, students are required to construct effective sentences.

- Example 2:

Also, if they give good ideas in **work team**, they will get recommendation from their team’s friends. (10.19)

In this case, the student misordered the words “work” and “team”. The correct sentence should be as followed:

Also, if they give good ideas in **team-work**, they will get recommendation from their team’s friends.

It seemed that the student cannot perform the right formation process. He/she might want to say “*kerja tim*” or “*kerja kelompok*” which is “team-work”, but the words were misordered.

Blends

Blends is the use of two or more morphemes that have the same function. Blends is the least errors occurred in the students’ essays. There are 5 (1.88%) blends errors in students’ essays. The examples are as followed:

- Example 1:

Many people believe international school is the best place because they deliver all the material in English and use the curriculum there so the students **can be able to** speak and understand the material in English. (5.27)

Syntactically, “can be able to” is not an error, since it does not violate the parts of speech formation. “Can” is a modal auxiliary which can be followed by “be able to”. However, the meaning of those two is just the same, so it is unnecessary to write down “be able to”. Below is the correction to the sentence:

Many people believe international school is the best place because they deliver all the material in English and use the curriculum there so the students **can** speak and understand the material in English.

The most possible reason to this blends error is that the student is not sure which one of the form is used (James, 1998), so he/she put both “can” and “be able to” in the sentence. However, the writer does not think so. There is also some possibility that the student generalized the form of “would be able to” and substituted the modal auxiliary without knowing the meaning.

- Example 2:

Because of its variety of factory, then there are **a lot of various** kinds of trash that they throw including the trashes that they throw into the river. (11.12)

Again, the student repeated the same idea which is “many”. The writer corrected the sentence as followed:

Because of its variety of factory, then there are **various** kinds of trash that they throw including the trashes that they throw into the river.

The student wanted to mention that there are some kinds of trash, but he/she write down the idea twice. “A lot of” and “various” have the same purpose in the sentence, so one of them should be eliminated.

OVERALL FINDINGS

After analyzing the data, the writer realized that misinformation, omission, and addition distributed equitably among the students. For instance, misinformation is produced the most by students with B, C and D grade. The writer noticed that students with grade A, B+, and B tried to compose compound and complex sentences. However, students with weaker grammar competence whose score was B, produced more errors. On the other hand, students with grade C+, C, and D tent to compose simple sentences. Those who got C+ could compose more errorless sentences than those who got C and D. Interestingly, even though students who got B, tried to compose different kinds of sentences compared to students with C and D score, they actually produced misinformation on the same parts of speech which are nouns, verbs, and prepositions. It indicated that generally, students are quite weak in tenses and word formation processes. Another reason why B-scored students interestingly produced more errors than C-scored students is because the evaluation portion for grammatical issues for an essay is about 10-15% only. Besides misinformation, omission also occurred quiet frequently in the essays, especially in essays written by students with C score. They usually omitted the article. It is an indicator that they did not understand about the function of the articles. Finally, addition is the most distributed error in students’ essays. Generally, students with grade B to D produced at least two errors on addition. They usually overused the article “the” and conjunctions like “and”, “but”, etc.

CONCLUSION

In general, the five types of errors which are addition, omission, misinformation, misordering, and blends occurred in most students’ essays. Only students with A score produced two types of errors which are misinformation and omission. Besides, students with B score did not produce blends at all. The rest of the students produced each type of errors at least once.

Students made errors since they apply Indonesian language speaking style in their sentence construction. Therefore, their word ordering tends to be like spoken Indonesian language. In addition, their lack of knowledge on word families, word formation, and tenses also caused them to produce 178 misinformation errors (66.92%), especially on nouns and verb.

Despite their status as students of Written English 4 class, which is the final writing class, the students still produced so many errors on basic English grammar and structures. In this class, the students are asked to write essays on some given topics on current issues. The quality of their essays is supposed to be newspaper article quality with concise and error-free sentences. However, some of the students produced so many errors. The writer noticed that 75% of the errors accumulated on six students who got B, C, and D grade which possibly means, these students were actually not qualified to pass the previous level of writing class and join Written English 4 class. Even in the final test, which was held at the end of the semester, the students could not perform well.

As stated in the first chapter, grammar is an essential source of information since communication could be chaotic without grammar. However, errors cannot be avoided in learning process, especially in second language class. It is not a guarantee that students

who get high score in writing can write error-free sentences. Students can often fail to construct desired form of sentences of the target language due to the influence of their first language. They want to express their ideas in English, but they use Indonesian wording.

As a suggestion, the students should practice more on English grammar, and read many good reading sources to change their sentence construction pattern. English Department might also cooperate with HIMASAINTRA to provide the students with grammar tutors in order to help them improve their English skills. Besides, the curriculum should also provide students with syntax class in their early semester instead of in their late semester as they need to learn about correct sentence construction as early as possible. There is also another suggestion for the teachers of written class. In this research, the writer found out that students who got B grade produced 63 errors which is surprising as students with D grade produced 67 errors. This could happen as the portion of grammar evaluation in the grading policy is only 10-15%. In fact, ungrammatical sentences might cause confusion and miscommunication in students' writing. So, it is essential that the teachers increase the portion of grammar evaluation in grading policy up to 40%. The writer also suggests that further research is conducted on error analysis using different variables. There are many more factors that the writer has not measured in the students' essays such as coherence, cohesion, punctuation, etc.

REFERENCES

- Azar, B. S. (1999). *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Batstone, R. (1994). *Grammar*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cambridge University Press. (2008). *Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary*. Italy: L.E.G.O.S.p.A.
- Ellis, R. and Barkhuizen, G. (2005). *Analysing Learner Language*. China: Oxford University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and Researching Writing*. London: Longman.
- James, C. (1998). *Errors in Language Learning and Use*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited
- Maicusi, T. and Maicusi, P. (2000). The Error in The Second Language Acquisition. *María José Carrillo López*, 168-173.
- Microsoft Corporation. (2009). *Encarta Dictionaries (Version 16)*. Microsoft Encarta.
- Myles, J. (2002). Second Language Writing and Research: The Writing Process and Error Analysis in Student Texts. *Teaching English as a Second Language English Journal*, 6, 2.